

The Bend Bulletin

High Court Judge Visits Bend to Promote Better Legal Aid

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When an Oregon Supreme Court Justice arrived at Central Oregon's Office of Legal Aid Services Wednesday evening about 30 minutes late and with wind-blown hair, nobody thought much of it.

Then again nobody attending an open house to discuss legal aid funding and service issues in the state knew exactly what Thomas A. Balmer went through to give a speech on the subject.

Halfway to Bend on his drive from Salem, Balmer's old Volvo wagon started smoking and died. Only as far as the Santiam Pass, there was no time to spare.

Balmer grabbed the paper that he had jotted notes for his speech on and abandoned his neck tie and formerly reliable vehicle. It had been a long time since he flagged a ride with his thumb, but he was desperate. Luckily a Mustang convertible headed for Bend offered a lift.

A little car trouble wasn't about to keep him from delivering his message.

"Through support for legal aid we can make sure we are not closing courthouse doors on anybody," Balmer told about 20 lawyers, judicial and legislative leaders during the open house.

Oregon's 16 Legal Aid offices strive to provide civil legal services for the state's low-income population.

About 20 percent of Oregon residents qualify for the legal aid but only about 111 lawyers (less than 1 percent of the bar) compose the state's legal aid services network.

Legal Aid offices reject two out of three people that qualify for help and have a legitimate grievance because they don't have the resources officials said.

Oregon is meeting 18 percent of the need for civil legal services to low-income Oregonians, according to a Legal Need Study.

"The biggest crisis is federal funding," said Bob Turner, director of Central Oregon regional office in Bend. "Federal funding is half of what it was in 1980." In 1996 legal aid services were nearly eliminated by U.S. House leaders. Instead, they cut funding by \$122 million, causing 300 office closures and 900 attorney layoffs nationwide.

Federal funding accounts for about one third of Oregon's estimated \$11.5 legal aid budget. The remainder comes from filing fees, interest on Lawyer's Trust Accounts, contributions from attorneys, foundation grants and corporate support.

With that money legal aid provides the poor, elderly, disabled, unemployed and disadvantaged population with civil legal services. They help those people with housing, domestic violence, divorce, child custody and employment cases.

A big part of legal aid's success depends on pro bono, or free, work by lawyers.

"Legal aid is so important for our community and country because people need to have access to the court system," former state Sen. Neil Bryant said.

For that reason it's too important for lawyers not to participate pro bono, he said.

Retired Judge Joseph Thalhoffer agreed.

At Wednesday's open house the local office honored him with an award for his dedication to providing pro bono legal assistance for low-income seniors in Central Oregon.

"It's kind of fun doing this pro bono work," Thalhoffer said.